MAY DAY CELEBRATION

a cura di
Andrea Panaccione

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Andrea Panaccione

INTRODUCTION

Calendars are not only a way to measure time: they are also, as Walter Benjamin says «monuments of historical awareness». May Day is the main date of the calendar of labour movement. The approaching of its centennial gives the opportunity to evaluate the aims, the organization, the relationship among different social and political parties. Even more, it helps to focus our attention on the changes and developments of self awareness within the labour movement, and on the ways the labour movement itself is present in the imagination of those who take part in it.

This perspective was taken as the starting point of the international project of research on May Day history. The project was started three years ago by Fondazione Brodolini of Milan: and this *Quaderno* is a part of it, as the one already published in 1986, *Sappi che oggi è la tua festa...* It is a perspective that — besides making the study of May Day a way to interpret the fights and claims brought forth through its celebration — also outlines an important characteristic of the labour movement: its universality on the one hand, and its aspiration to conciliate its universal character with the variety of national and local situations, on the other. In other words this approach illuminates the relationship of the workers' movements with their respective political and cultural traditions. Consequently, the pursuit of this renewed perspective in the research and the reconstruction of labour movement's history is a way to grasp its richness and its complexity.

Even from its very beginning, May Day celebration and its main aim, i.e. the 8 hour day, have never represented a plain reaction to

the new conditions of work created by technical and economic development. In effect May Day immediately suggested the search for an aim to be pursued jointly, even though the aim itself could appear premature, — and in fact this was the case.

The socialists, who were going to become the prevailing party inside the 2nd International, stressed the role of the political action in order to obtain social legislation as the real workers' unifying element. The Anarchists instead, fixed their attention on displaying the strength of all workers beyond all their separation, that is to say they upheld the idea of the general strike.

We should add anyway that the aim of the 8 hour day itself was a unifying element, not only because it represented a material advantage, but mainly because that idea brought forth symbolical meanings, such as the need to establish a right balance between time dedicated to work and time dedicated to life. This meaning was expressed by the «three eights» formula, i.e. eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for leisure time.

The limitation to time dedicated to work — the abstract form of labour, which corresponds to the amount of hours daily subtracted from a workers' life — suggests a reassuring idea of uniformity in working conditions, a fact that, according to the socialists of the Second International, would have stengthened and granted the growth of workers' organization. However, the appropriation of a new lapse of time created new needs: culture, society and a new relationship with nature. Hence that particular feeling that transformed a demonstration into a celebration, a feeling that was expressed through artistic production such as literature, shows, chants and handicrafts expressly created for May Day. That feeling also required a new relationship with nature that became a symbol of social emancipation: the awakening of nature was compared to society's awakening; the sun of May Day was enlightening the reasons for class-struggle; the image of a radiant sunrise (*L'Alba Radiosa*) or that of the evening (*Le Grand Soir*) was announcing a new era for human life; the idea of a future to come was seen as a redemption both for men and nature.

So William Morris, in his *News from Nowhere* of 1891 gave the following description of May Day, a solemn feast — as he said — that commemorated the Clearing of Misery: «On that day we have music and dancing, and merry games and happy feasting on the site of some of the worst of the old slums, the traditional memory of which we have kept. On that occasion the custom is for the prettiest girls

to sing some of the old revolutionary songs, and those which were the groans of the discontent, once so hopeless, on the very spots where those terrible crimes of class-murder, were committed day by day for so many years. To a man like me, who has studied the past so diligently, it is a curious and touching sight to see some beautiful girl, daintily clad, and crowned with flowers from the neighbouring meadows, standing amongst the happy people, on some mound where of old time stood the wretched apology for a house, a den in which men and women lived packed amongst the filth like pilchards in a cask» (W. Morris, *News from Nowhere or an Epoch of Rest*, London, 1891, p. 72-73).

The 8 hour day movement displayed to the workers new dimensions of time: working time and living time; nature's time with its cycles that began to be seen as a recurring promise of awakening and renewal; time for memory, represented by a different celebration in the calendar; the mythical time of revolution, which was awaited and thought to be imminent; historical time, with the growth of labour movement and the different conjunctures that characterized the May Day celebrations.

Anyway, beside the theme of the 8 hour day, there are many other propulsive ideas bound to May Day: equality, quested through political struggle and through the revendication of civil rights and universal suffrage; internationalism, seen as the request for national dignity among people, as solidarity towards oppressed people all over the world, and as a struggle for peace; the hope and the will for redemption and emancipation, both aiming to improve the relationships between men, with reference not only to the economic aspect, but also to the cultural, family and sexual aspects.

The possibility to grasp the variety of May Day history and the transformations of its original character requires an effort in research in order to compare the different manifestations through which the celebration is expressed.

This is what we have tried to achieve in the present *Quaderno*, through contributions — Feng Xiao, James Jemnitz, Steiner, Timofeev, and the Institute for International Labour Movement of Moscow — that help to compare different contexts of May Day's history, as well as different conjectures and feelings through which it can be understood and reconstructed.

That's why the scholar should try not to simplify nor to reduce the variety of the allegories which inspire the celebration, even if the

labour movement itself has sometimes simplified them, for instance when different spheres (ecnomic and political struggle) and their relevant areas (unions and party) were used to manage different moments of May Day demonstrations.

The main strength of May Day, when it was really felt, has always been the power to expand its appeal even among sectors which were formerly distant from worker's organizations, a power granted by the needs and the values expressed through the celebration.

A further important aspect of this May Day project is the choice of a research for methodology that analyzes the forms of expression and communication typical of labour movements. The essay by G. Ginex in this *Quaderno* illustrates the meaningful principles of investigation and the results of a research on May Day single issues kept by the libraries of Milan and Florence. The detailed content of this research will be published in a volume, that is going to be issued by Fondazione Brodolini (edited by M. Antonioli and G. Ginex). In this volume the filing of all illustrations, which will be reproduced with photographs, has been accomplished following the same method adopted for the articles' filing. The illustrations of May Day single issues (more or less a third of the filed publications) were not a mere decorative appendix. They proved to be — through the methodology that G. Ginex describes in the *Quaderno* — an integral part of the text (in fact, more than 90% of the illustrations were chosen «ad hoc», according to the themes developed in the publication).

Not only the iconographic filing allows us to point out the themes that were chosen to visualize the contents of the celebration and the symbolic/allegorical elements expressed by them through the years; the filing also reveals the awareness of the single issues' editors, who realized that images could be a valuable way to communicate and propagandize.

This awareness is testified by an evolution in iconography: at the beginnings allegories were quite generic, while later on, and especially at the end of the first decade of the XX century, we find that more specialized artists were engaged in iconographic production, with better and more effective results.

Focusing the attention on communication, diffusion, and on the comparison between different cultures, traditions and sensibilities, allows us to identify a fertile field of research, i.e. May Day among Italian emigrants in the Usa.

In their celebrations we can find elements deriving from the coun-

tries of origin, as well as the changes caused by the emigrant's experience; an important subject of investigation can be represented by a study on the relations between the Italian community and industrial society and on the transformations within labour culture.

Italian emigrant's May Day in the Usa (see the contributions by S. Garroni. R. Vecoli, E. Vezzosi) displays a double presence — cultural and political — which reflects the events of its protagonists as well as the events that marked the transition from American to international May Day.

This transition gave rise to a divarication which yielded conflicts but also identity and homogenity; consequently, it created a situation more complicated than the mere position of class.

Finally, May Day and World War I, which is the subject of the contribution by F. Giagnotti and is also treated in the research by R. Vecoli («After August 1914, Primo Maggio would never again be what it had been before»), is the theme which better shows the gap between the idea (international solidarity among workers) and reality. Nevertheless, the idea of internationalism — as regret, as anger, as a constant symptom of socialism, as a forced tribute to a tradition that was often misrepresented — was something that still impinged on militants' consciousness.

A further symptom of the gap between idea and reality — besides the war that is its most tragic and tangible example — is the comparison between past and present, which is more than a recurring theme in May Day's history: this comparison even defines the spiritual dimension of the celebration, since it reflects its recurrence together with the changes in the frame of mind of those who took part in it.

This is what R. Vecoli reminds us with the example of Italian anarchists in the Usa, who «rejected the past for the future, were uncomfortable with tradition, complained that Primo Maggio no longer had any significance», but still «continued to observe it in some fashion year in and year out».

Translated by Stefania Randolfi

I'd like to thank Bruno Cartosio for his valuable cooperation in the editing of this book.

Translators: Marina Enriquez, Katherine Frost, Margaret Kunzle, Stefania Randolfi, Livia Zannini.

I'd like to point out that either the late delivery of some of the essays or their length has prevented the editors from accomplishing general linguistic revision of the texts of the essays included in the present volume.